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The Workshop

A Monthly Journal, devoted to Progress of the Useful Arts

EDITED BY

PROF. W. BAUMER, I. SCHNORR AND OTHERS.

VOL. II.

NO. 4.

ORNAMENTAL IRON-WORK.*

BY MR. JACOB FALKE.

In the course of the seventeenth century other decorative treatments of Iron-work supplanted etching which gradually fell into disuse. The design was sometimes engraved into the metal; but especially thin, pierced ornamental plates were frequently employed for the enrichment of the flat surface; of iron in the first instance, they were afterwards of polished brass, when outward show and brilliancy instead of simple beauty in art were aimed at. These decorative devices were not relief-work but merely surface ornament; raised leaves and flowers are however found, although embossed from very thin sheets of malleable iron, thereby deficient in point of solidity.

During the development of smith-work, the craft of the armourer had produced works of art of the highest excellence and perfection. There were genuine artists, many of great renown, who during the sixteenth century devoted themselves to the manufacture of armour in Milan, Augsburg and many other places. The real problem was indeed to make the cuirass shot-proof; but these heavy pieces being only worn in war, rich noblemen and princes had splendid suits of lighter make for state occasions, wrought with great art, and showing most elegant and beautiful enrichment, their other arms and pieces of ornament being of corresponding richness.

There were, technically speaking, three entirely different styles of decorative treatment. First the etching above mentioned, the development of which may be attributed partly to the etched plates of Albert Dürer.

Suits of armour with ornamental and figured etching dating from his time, are to be met with which remind us of his style and treatment. The devices are of exquisite beauty and elegance in detail, but viewed as a whole from a certain distance they make too little outward show, being less gorgeous in appearance, for which reason they used to be enhanced with rich gold ornaments. Etchings were frequently applied also to sword-blades and to shields, as long as these were in use.

The second, more difficult mode of ornamentation consisted of hammered or *repoussé* and chased work. In the beginning merely channels or flutings were punched into the steel, producing by their polish the brilliant reflection of light and shade. But as early as in the first half of the sixteenth century the most delicate raised work, such as only the highest refinement of art of the period could produce, was resorted to for the enrichment of the armour and harness of knight and steed, covering them with reliefs of the greatest beauty and perfection of workmanship. Historical and mythological subjects, ornaments with masks, fantastic or real figures, and similar types or features of the Renaissance were hammered and chased in steel and iron, sometimes with as much perfection as if modelled in wax. Our art-collections exhibit many specimens of that high perfection of workmanship for which the productions of that epoch, especially Augsburg work, are justly renowned. Partial gilding was often combined with this otherwise solid and truly genuine style of art-workmanship; but it must be considered an aberration, and an exaggerated gorgeousness for these suits of armour to be entirely

* See p. 33 *ante*.
The Workshop. 1869.

gilt. In this case the chasing is also generally less perfect, and it is not much to be regretted if the brilliant polish of the gold has to atone for the deficiency in artistic value.

A third style of ornamentation, decidedly of Eastern origin, and suggested by the arms captured in the Turkish wars, or acquired by commercial intercourse with the East, was introduced by the armourers and swordsmiths; such specimens being, even at that date, in great favor amongst soldiers and art-collectors. It consisted in the damascening (*tausio*) i. e., incrusting of one metal on another, generally gold or silver on iron or steel. The precious metal, according to the drawn or engraved pattern, hammered into the heated, common metal, was often applied in such thin sheets as to appear like mere gilding. Still such a supposition would be very erroneous, only genuine, solid gold or silver being used for such decorative treatment, for which reason their brilliancy and rich effect have remained untarnished, unless injured by rust, causing it to scale off.

The ornaments also thereby in use are Oriental motives, borrowed, with the *technique* itself, from their armour. They show the charming arabesque-work of ancient Eastern art, the graceful play of interlaced bands and lines, interspersed with leaves and flowers, which, being adopted by the armourer, soon found their way to the workshop of the gold-smith and the studio of the illuminator; or they adorned book-covers and mounts, as well as the productions of many an other craft. Even in modern decoration we can trace their influence although often devoid of their original character. The boss or umbo of the shield, the helmet, the plates of the armour, the hilt-knob and blade of sword and poniard, especially on their under parts, were profusely covered with these elegant arabesques in charming arrangement, they being generally applied wherever a suitable surface for their display presented itself. If some difference can be discerned in the ornamentation of the productions of Eastern and Western origin, it is that oriental motives (see fig. 4) present a close design, with the general effect and repose produced by a quiet pattern, while the European work is marked by a bolder design of the main features on a broad ground, both which characteristics may be seen combined in the Hungarian state armours.

In the second half of the sixteenth century those three styles of decorative treatment were sometimes combined; damascening, especially, was united with *repoussé* work, chased figures, representing e. g., knights in armour, being suitably enriched with incrustated gold ornaments. They were also adopted for objects of art for domestic use, chests and caskets being covered with them. We would mention here as a typical specimen a large iron desk, now in the possession of the Vienna treasury, the work of the Italian artist Joseph de Vici, engaged in the service of the Emperor Maximilian II.

of Austria and dated 1569. The model and precursor of our modern strongboxes, it is a unique specimen of its kind, enriched with ornament of unsurpassed beauty and elegance. The iron case forms an architecturally designed framework for niches and compartments with chased iron figures, damascened gold and silver ornament filling the intermediate spaces and especially the interior.

A fourth style of armourer's work, which originated about the same time, must not be passed over. We refer to the chiselled knobs and basket-hilts of swords and poniards, many excellent specimens of which are still extant. The technical difficulties and the amount of trouble incurred by this style, caused it to be restricted to the above objects, or at best it was used for the enrichment of costly guns, the locks of which were, however, generally adorned with engraved figures and ornaments, sometimes also with damascening.

All these modes of decoration were in use at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which still furnished some excellent works, although not quite equal to the splendid specimens of the sixteenth, from which time the decline of the art must be dated. Real armour had already become rather useless in the course of the first half of the seventeenth century, and art ceasing to attach any value to it, the craft itself, being found to be unremunerative, as a natural consequence began to decline. It might not seem to follow of necessity that the manufacture of other arms, principally swords and fire arms, would have to suffer too; still this was the case, for they decidedly deteriorated in an artistic sense, and thus the three principal styles of decorative treatment fell out of fashion while gilding and blue damascening usurped their place.

In the East only, artistic Iron-work preserved its influence in all directions, although somewhat defective in design and execution. It is very difficult to find modern Eastern arms, which can compete, with regard to art and the purity and beauty of damascening, with the old weapons which we frequently meet with. It is true the Japanese make chiselled steel-hilts with little figures and ornaments in relief, wrought with extraordinary skill but baroque in taste; but Indians must certainly be ranked highest, not only for their gold-damascened shields, helmets, sword-hilts and blades, but also for all sorts of iron vases, caskets and utensils with inlaid goldornament, the fine goldfillets showing delicate relief. Notwithstanding the profusion of goldlines, the design being always quiet and clear, these works are most charming in effect with their ever-varying golden hue inimitable by any gilding.

The Indians are equally successful now with silver ornamentation, the style of work being quite the same as that employed for the enrichment of the Merovingian tombs, above mentioned. It consists of delicate sheets of silver, incrustated on iron according to the design, and applied to all sorts of objects, i. e., arms, and utensils,

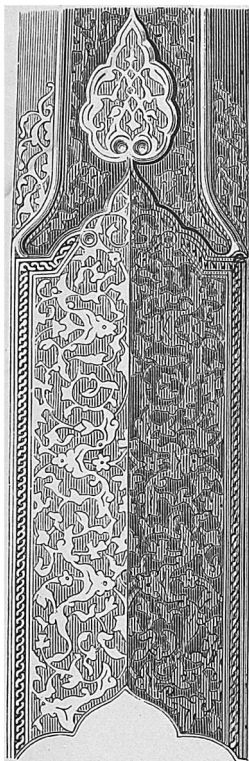


Fig. 4.

Damascened gold arabesques on the blade of an Indian poniard.

Sixteenth century.



Fig. 5.

Iron Bottle with incrustated silver ornament. Indian Biddra-work.

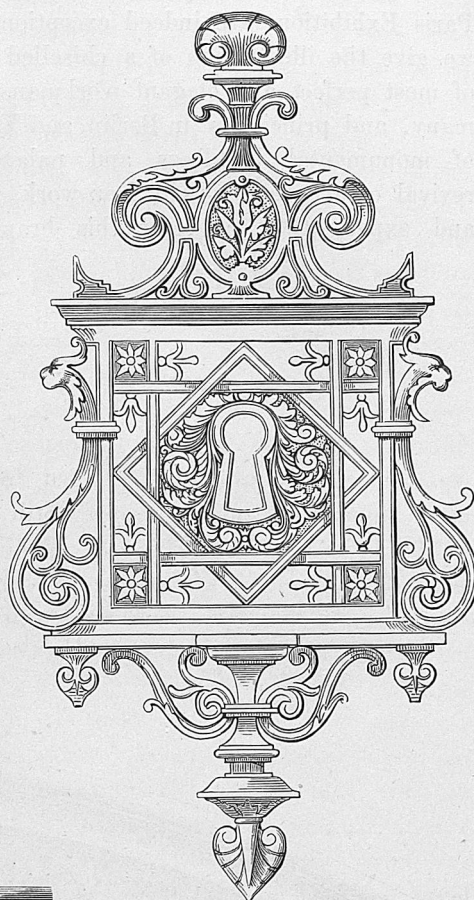


Fig. 6.

Chiselled steel-lock. Recent work;
M. Huby, Paris.

especially the bulbed vessels for hookahs with mounts made of a black alloy of iron-like appearance; the effect of the silver incrustation on black ground being very noble and elegant (see fig. 5). The Persians, also, produce similar works and the same decorative treatment may be observed on Caucasian arms and utensils. A modification of this is the silver-ornamented iron-work of Tula, now almost forgotten, but formerly well-known by the inlaid snuffboxes imported in great numbers into Western Europe. All these productions are of Eastern origin and it is but recently that the Russians have begun to change their charming and peculiarly characteristic arabesques into Rococo scroll-work and other European motives.

Nothing can be more appropriate for our modern iron utensils than the Indian silver incrustation above referred to, instead of the common-place decoration, mostly painting, of our strongboxes, caskets, desks and similar objects used in well-to-do households. But smaller

and finer Iron-work of our time does not seem inclined to introduce damascening; an exception in this respect was seen in the Paris Exhibition in a series of objects manufactured by the firm Zuloaga in Madrid, suggested by the gold-damascened arms of the sixteenth century with their oriental motives, and which are well worthy of imitation.

Wrought Iron-work seems in return to be revived for more important objects, as gates, grilles, screens, fire-dogs, gas standards and brackets, chandeliers, etc., many English and French firms of renown having taken the subject in hand. The English productions although perhaps the most judicious, are frequently too ponderous; and the polychromal treatment seems rather strange at first sight. The French on the other hand, are somewhat deficient as to a true conventional rendering; the flowers and leaves are too thin and light, showing sometimes direct imitation of natural types, a treatment not at all in conformity with the material. The excel-

lent works of M. Huby in Paris, as displayed in the Paris Exhibition, are indeed exceptions, and from these we give the illustration of a chiselled steel-lock (fig. 6) of most perfect and elegant workmanship. Also in Germany, and principally in Berlin and Vienna the erection of monumental buildings and palaces has caused a revival of artistic wrought Iron-work. So we may hope and expect that at least this branch of the art is

again progressing in the right way. Let but the more delicate work of the ancient chased and damascened arms revive once more, and with the continual intercourse of the different branches of Art-Industry the manufacture of fancy-articles may in many instances greatly profit by it, iron being often much better employed where leather or its substitutes are now inappropriately used. .

SPECIMENS OF ORNAMENTATION.



No. 1.

Nos. 1—5. Antique Silver Vessels, belonging to the treasure excavated at Hildesheim in 1868.

According to inscription, design and workmanship, of the time of Augustus, and supposed to belong to the silver plate of Varus, captured by Arminius.

No. 1. Roman Patera; real size.

The beautifully chased border ornament encircles a medallion, representing Minerva, sitting on a rock.